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Aid to Angola rebels reportedly eyed

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WASHINGTON - The Reagan administration is trying to chart a course to aid the rebels fighting the Marxist government of Angola while, at the same time, getting Angola to oust Cuban troops as part of a negotiated settlement with South Africa, officials said yesterday.

Since the Angolan government would be unlikely to want the United States to continue as broker in a negotiation with South Africa if it is openly supporting Angola's warring opposition, officials said the administration is leaning to covert aid, rather than overt assistance.

They said the threat of military assistance to the UNITA guerrillas led by Jonas Savimbi might, in fact, serve as potent leverage to pressure Angola to make important concessions in the now nearly stalled negotiations.

Officials said the hope is that negotiations between Angola and South Africa can bear fruit in coming weeks or months, making it unnecessary to provide direct aid to UNITA.

Assistant Secretary of State Chester Crocker recently returned from extensive discussions with Angolan and South African leaders, and while their differences haven't been narrowed very much, State Department sources disclosed that both sides urged that the United States continue its efforts.

At the White House on Tuesday, Larry Speakes, the White House spokesman, suggested that President Reagan had decided to seek assistance for UNITA.

But at the State Department yesterday, a spokesman, Bernard Kalb, shied away from confirming that a firm aid decision has been made. "UNITA is a legitimate nationalist organization and as Secretary [of State George P.] Shultz has said, we support its struggle against Soviet-Cuban adventurism in Angola," Kalb said.

Washington visit planned

"We are working towards ways to demonstrate that support in a manner that would be effective."

Other officials explained that the administration would have to consult with Congress, which has been chary about covert activities, to determine if it would nonetheless vote covert assistance to Savimbi's forces. Officials wouldn't discuss the scope of such assistance.

Savimbi will be in Washington next week on a private visit, and administration officials say he might be received by both Reagan and Shultz.

The difficult policy assessment occurs because most analysts feel neither UNITA guerrillas, backed by South Africa, nor Angolan government forces, backed by about 35,000 Cuban troops and up to 7,000 Soviet military advisers, can defeat the other in battle.

Last year, the Soviets and Cubans augmented their military presence and supported a major Angolan drive against UNITA, which fell short of its objectives. Cuban pilots flew combat support missions. Intelligence sources say preparations appear to be under way for

another major offensive, possibly in two to three months.

US seeking deal

For several years the administration has been seeking a deal whereby Angola would agree to ask Cuba to pull out its troops, and in return, South Africa would agree to stop helping UNITA and would pull its forces out of neighboring Namibia and permit UN-monitored elections and independence there.

The Angolans, it is understood, have said they would be prepared to have all but 5,000 to 8,000 Cubans leave over a period of two to three years, the bulk coming out toward the end of that period. They want a residual Cuban force to remain to protect the oil producing province of Cabinda.

The South Africans, who under UN resolution 435 would have to pull all their troops out of Namibia in about three months, want all Cuban troops to leave Angola within no more than a year, most of them early in the process.

US officials are trying to appeal to those elements in the Angolan government who would like to see, instead of an escalating civil war and a potential US-Soviet confrontation, formal diplomatic relations with the United States, along with more Western aid and investment. And that would require not only a negotiated settlement with South Africa but presumably also an offer to bring Savimbi, who leads the most numerous tribe in Angola, into a coalition government.